



PRESS RELEASE

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TWO ARIZONA WOMEN SENTENCED TO PRISON FOR CHILD SMUGGLING

TUCSON, ARIZONA –The United States Attorneys Office for the District of Arizona, announced that on February 19, 2004, Maria Christina Baez, DOB (05/21/71), of Tucson, Arizona, and Laura Gastelum, DOB (08/02/75) of Naco, Arizona, were sentenced to 16 and 15 months in prison respectively, by United States District Judge Frank R. Zapata, in Tucson, Arizona.

On August 22, 2003, Maria Christina Baez and Laura Gastelum were attempting to enter the United States from the Republic of Mexico at the Douglas Port of Entry in Arizona. The two women had five children in the van with them. Three of the children (two males, ages 4 and 7, and a female, age 3) were citizens of Mexico and did not have legal authority to be in the United States. Ms. Baez falsely claimed that the two male children were hers and were United States citizens. Ms. Gastelum falsely claimed that the female child was hers and was a United States citizen. Both women had driven from the United States into the Republic of Mexico after having made arrangements with a man named “Juan” to pick up the three Mexican children that they did not know. Once they picked up the children from a stranger, they took them to the Douglas Port of Entry. Neither woman knew who would receive the three children once they got the

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children into the United States. Both expected to be paid \$50 per child once they got the children into the United States illegally.

Both defendants pled guilty to Conspiracy to Bring in Illegal Aliens in violation of Title 8, United States Code, Sections 1324(a)(1)(A)(i), 1324(a)(1)(A)(v)(I), and 1324 (a)(1)(B)(i), a felony, on December 9, 2003. As part of the plea agreement, the defendants agreed to a sentencing range of 15 to 21 months prison.

In sentencing the defendants, the Honorable Judge Zapata commented that the sentencing guidelines do not take into effect the dangers and seriousness of smuggling children into the United States. Judge Zapata noted that there is a greater danger to the children than what is seen in typical alien smuggling cases. The judge stated that these children are brought into a foreign country without any knowledge of where they are going and who is going to take them to their next destination. Judge Zapata stated that there are no guarantees that these children are going to be kept safe.

The investigation in this case was conducted by Special Agent Paul Del Rincon of Immigration and Custom Enforcement of Douglas.

The prosecution was handled by Serra M. Tsethlikai, Assistant United States Attorney, District of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona.

CASE NUMBER: CR-03-1854-TUC-FRZ
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